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Author(s): Robert Miles

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Nationality, Citizenship, and Migration to Britain, 1945-1951

ROBERT MILES*

INTRODUCTION

Any discussion of migration to Britain, and its consequences, over the past twenty-five years will usually equate the terms 'migrant' or 'immigrant' with the terms 'race', 'coloured', and 'race relations'. Even if we accept the validity of such terms, such an association is contrary to the evidence. As Holmes has recently noted, since 1945 and 'down to 1971 the Irish constituted the largest immigrant minority in postwar Britain'¹, while over the past one hundred years, the vast majority of migrants to Britain have originated from Europe rather than from colonies and ex-colonies and so cannot be signified as members of 'coloured races'.²

This historical fact is highlighted by consideration of the period 1945-51, during which there was a major labour shortage which the Labour Government attempted to resolve by organizing a number of migrations from Europe. These occurred within the framework of different legal arrangements, although they all had in common the fact that the majority of those admitted to Britain were classified by British law as aliens. Moreover, a significant proportion of the migrants were, in one sense or another, political refugees (some of whom were formally stateless). Although the British Government expressed humanitarian concern about their plight, a key determinant of the policy of admission and subsequent resettlement was economic.

Against the background of an overview of these migrations and of the legal framework that structured them, the main objective of this paper is to confront an apparent paradox. The migrations took place in a context where the British Government effected significant changes to British nationality law which reiterated that the populations of the colonies and Commonwealth countries were British citizens. Consequently, they had the right of entry to, and settlement in, Britain, and yet it was not to these parts of the world that the

* *Research Unit on Migration and Racism, Department of Sociology, University of Glasgow, Glasgow G12 8QQ, Scotland.*

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Labour Government first directed its gaze when considering how to solve the labour shortage by means of migration. Indeed, when a small number of citizens of the United Kingdom and Colonies did exercise their right to enter Britain, the reaction of the Labour Government was to seek a means by which 'coloured British subjects' might be deprived of their right of entry. The objective of this paper is to outline, contextualize, and offer an explanation (which involves commenting on other accounts) for this course of events.

The decision of the Labour Government to recruit alien or stateless labour from Europe, along with its reluctance to extend that recruitment to include British citizens in the colonies, is a matter that has received little attention in recent historical analyses of the period. Morgan, for example, ignores the former completely and makes only a passing reference to Cabinet discussion in 1950 about the consequences of Caribbean migration to Britain.³ Cairncross refers briefly to the recruitment of European Volunteer Workers (EVWs), as well as to discussion about the possibilities of utilizing prisoner-of-war (POW) and Polish labour, but makes no reference to the migration to Britain from the Caribbean.⁴

This could be interpreted to mean that the historical recovery being attempted here is of little significance. After all, the total number of aliens who entered waged labour in Britain in the period of the Labour Government was probably under 400,000, and they therefore constituted only a very small proportion of the nearly nineteen million persons employed in Britain in 1947. The proportion is not dramatically increased by the addition to this figure of the 150,000 Irish citizens and of the several hundreds of people who migrated from the Caribbean to British seeking employment during the same period.

Such an interpretation is mistaken. Labour shortages and the use of migrant labour to assist the solution of the problem were common to several north-western European nation states soon after the end of the Second World War.⁵ With the exception of Britain, all other north-west European nation states actively initiated or encouraged – to varying extents and at different times – migration to assist the expansion of capitalist production. Yet, for the duration of the Labour Government, we see it confronting the possibility of utilizing migrant labour, then failing to develop its limited initiative, and finally discussing ways to prevent the entry of British citizens who were seeking employment. In so far as the limited use of migrant labour is a factor which explains the comparatively slow rate of capitalist development in Britain,⁶ the political decisions and ideological assumptions that lay behind this warrant explanation.⁷

In the first section of the paper, I provide an overview of the legal framework determining inward migration flows and of the migration flows themselves. Thereafter, I analyse the main determinants of the migrations and the main themes that ran through the political debate about immigration during the late 1940s as a basis for confronting the previously identified paradox.

MIGRATION TO BRITAIN, 1945-1951

Both the legal concept of nationality and formalized systems of immigration control are, in historical terms, recent social constructs. They have their origin in the development of the nation state and the conception that those who live within the boundaries of any particular nation state have certain rights and obligations, the most significant being the right to political participation. It is for this reason that Plender argues that the origin of the conception of nationality lies, in part, with the French Revolution.⁸ Thus, with the rise of the nation state and the emergence of the idea that those who lived within its boundaries were members of an 'imagined community'⁹ with collective interests grounded in a common heritage, the possession of common characteristics and the universalization of political rights, there developed a dichotomy between *national* and *alien* (or *foreigner*). The former, as citizens, were considered to have the right of residence and political participation within the nation state while the latter could enter only with the permission of the state which assumed sovereignty over the nation.¹⁰

In the case of England (and later Britain), there is a history of legislation from the seventeenth century which sought to specify the status of people resident in England who were born elsewhere, as well as people born outside England of parents who were 'natural born subjects' of England.¹¹ While most of the Acts embodied the notion of nationality in their titles, this legislation neither formulated nor attributed legal status to nationality. Rather, it consistently opposed the categories of *subject* and *alien*, although the former category can be considered to embody the meaning of nationality.¹² These dichotomous categories were embodied in the British Nationality and Status of Aliens Act 1914 which, *inter alia*, provided for children born outside Britain to be themselves designated as British subjects if their father was a British subject, and specified that any person born within the dominions and allegiance of the Crown should be considered a British subject. The latter provision therefore included most of the population of the colonies and dominions as British subjects.¹³

This distinction in British law was made problematic by the desire of governments in the dominions to establish independent criteria for the acquisition of nationality within their territory, a desire legitimated by the Statute of Westminster (1931) but which proposed that this right be reconciled with the common status of British subject.¹⁴ Action was forced on the post-1945 Labour Government, not by Indian independence as is commonly asserted,¹⁵ but by the decision in 1946 of the Canadian Government to establish its own citizenship laws,¹⁶ to which the Labour Government responded by passing the British Nationality Act 1948 which sustained the common status of British subject in an attenuated form.

This Act distinguished between *citizens* of the United Kingdom and Colonies and *citizens* of Commonwealth countries but laid down that both categories had the status of British *subject*. Any such person was thereafter to be known as either a British subject or a Commonwealth citizen, the two

categories being identical in terms of their rights (including that of entry and settlement in Britain). In practice, the population of the world therefore continued to be divided into British subjects and aliens, but the former category included those who were citizens of the United Kingdom and Colonies as well as citizens of independent Commonwealth countries.¹⁷

There was, however, a crucial anomaly, that of the legal status of the population of what is now the Republic of Ireland, which was reinforced by the British Nationality Act 1948. Subsequent to independence, citizens of the Irish Free State had been granted in British law the same status as citizens of the dominions, as a result of which Irish citizens remained free to enter and settle in Britain. And British subjects were accorded the same right with respect to the territory of the Irish Free State.¹⁸ No change was made to this situation by the British Nationality Act 1948, with the result that although an Irish citizen was not formally a British subject, neither was she or he an alien.¹⁹

Thus, throughout the period of the post-1945 Labour Government, all British subjects, as well as all Irish citizens, were not subject to immigration control. Only the entry of aliens was controlled by the British state. The key legislation concerning this latter category began with the Aliens Act 1905, the powers being amended and extended by further legislation in 1914 and 1919, and by the Aliens Order (1920).²⁰ As a result, an immigration officer could refuse entry to an alien if the person was mentally ill, medically unfit, or unable to support herself or himself. And if an alien was seeking entry in order to work, she or he was required to be in possession of a work permit issued by the Minister of Labour initially to the employer.²¹

Against this legal background, one can document the migration flows into Britain between 1945 and 1951 which can be divided into the categories of British subjects, Irish citizens, and aliens. Concerning the first, approximately 319,800 British subjects entered Britain between 1946 and 1951, the vast majority from the British dominions. Additionally, around 88,000 arrived from the colonies, the majority of whom were British subjects previously born in Britain who had served in the colonial administration or the armed forces. But also included were a small number of 'coloured' (to use the discourse of the period) British subjects from the Caribbean and West Africa, many of whom were students. Of this group, there were also several hundred people who were seeking paid labour, and therefore at least temporary residence, in Britain, some of whom had played a role in the Allied war effort.²²

Migration to Britain from Ireland had been rigidly controlled during the war due to Irish neutrality, but it had nevertheless continued under state control because of labour demand within Britain. Those recruited by the state were directed to specific employment which could not be changed without permission. These controls were relaxed in mid-1946 and abolished at the end of 1947,²³ and thereafter evaluating the scale of the migration becomes difficult. Isaac estimates that, in the period 1946-1950, there was a net inflow of between 100,000 and 150,000 Irish citizens who intended to stay for more than one year, that is an annual net inflow of between 20,000 and 30,000 persons.²⁴ These migrants added to an already substantial Irish presence in Britain, with

the 1951 census recording 716,000 Irish citizens living in Britain.²⁵ A proportion of these migrants entered Britain within the framework of a continuing state recruitment policy and were guided into work in coal mining and agriculture, but the majority migrated without any official assistance or support.²⁶

The third category of migrants, those who were aliens, needs to be seen as a number of distinct migration flows. First, there were those who entered Britain in possession of a work permit issued under the provisions of the Aliens Order (1920). Between 1946 and 1951, 173,037 permits were issued and, with the exception of 1946 (when 10,744 permits were issued), between 27,000 and 37,000 were issued annually. The majority were issued to women of European origin for domestic service in private houses, hospitals, and educational institutions.²⁷

The second category consisted of members of the Polish Armed Forces and their dependants, many of whom had arrived in Britain during the war.²⁸ In 1940, the Polish Government and Armed Forces in exile had been allowed to enter Britain and they were later joined in 1946 by the Polish Second Corps and dependants. Given their military status in the context of the circumstances of war and the subsequent imposition of Communist rule in Poland, the provisions of the Aliens Order (1920) did not apply to their entry. In May 1946, the War Office and the Air Ministry formed the Polish Resettlement Corps (PRC)²⁹ with the intention of disbanding the armed forces and assisting, depending upon the Poles' individual choice, their return to Poland, their emigration to other countries, or their resettlement and employment in Britain. The latter process was assisted by the Polish Resettlement Act 1947.³⁰

Against a background of government hesitation and uncertainty, a number of factors led to the decision to offer resettlement in Britain. In addition to humanitarian considerations, there was sympathy for the anti-communist sentiment of many of the Poles as well as a desire to use their labour power in sectors of the economy facing labour shortages.³¹ Thus, members of the PRC who opted for employment in Britain were initially directed by the Ministry of Labour into certain kinds of work, especially coal mining and agriculture.³² In 1949, the Polish population resident in Britain numbered 127,900 persons, but this had fallen to around 115,000 by 1950 as a result of further emigration and repatriation.³³

The third alien migration flow consisted of those persons recruited collectively by the British state under contract to work in designated employment. The main scheme recruited refugees from displaced persons camps in West Germany and Austria,³⁴ specifically in order to enter sectors of the economy which were defined by the state as essential to capitalist reconstruction and which were facing labour shortages. Those refugees who volunteered and were accepted (and who became known as European Volunteer Workers) were required to sign a contract, under which they accepted a job selected by the Minister of Labour, a job that they could only change with the permission of the Minister. They were initially admitted for one year, although they were later allowed to settle permanently.

The conditions of placement in employment varied somewhat, but they usually included the requirements that no British labour was available, that the EVWs would be the first to be made unemployed in the event of redundancy, that EVWs should join the appropriate trade union, and that they should work under the same conditions as British workers.³⁵ EVWs (both female and male) were recruited in two phases between 1946 and 1950, and the total number resident in Britain in 1950 was 80,811 persons.³⁶ Large numbers were directed to employment in agriculture, textile production, coal mining, and domestic service. All were restricted in the work that they could do by contract until January 1951 when it was announced that, after three years of residence, all restrictions would be lifted.³⁷

In addition to the EVW scheme, there was a number of smaller-scale state schemes of alien labour recruitment under contract. The 'Blue Danube' scheme recruited 2,341 Austrian women for textile work and nursing, and the 'North Sea' scheme recruited 9,713 German women for domestic work, both between 1948 and 1950. A further scheme, which began in late 1949 and ended in 1951, recruited 1,655 Italian women for factory and domestic work.³⁸ These were supplemented by further schemes involving the recruitment of 900 Belgian female domestic workers between July 1945 and early 1946; 250 Belgian male building workers between May 1946 and April 1947; 440 Italian male skilled foundry workers in 1947 and 1948; and 324 German scientists and technicians between November 1945 and late 1949.³⁹

The fourth category of aliens were former POWs who were granted civilian status after 1945, largely in the hope that they would remain in employment in agriculture where many POWs had been employed during the war. By the end of 1949, this included some 25,000 aliens (mainly from the Ukraine, Germany, and Italy) who either entered Britain during the war or who were brought to Britain after the war was over.⁴⁰

THE RACIALIZATION OF MIGRATION FLOWS

Against the background of this overview of migration flows, I contextualize the significance of nationality and citizenship by establishing three points. First, I demonstrate that these post-war migrations occurred in a context where it was noted by some that economic circumstances favoured large-scale migration into Britain. Second, I show that this evaluation led to discussion about the sources from which migrants might be drawn, in the course of which there was a racialization of all potential migrant populations.⁴¹ Third, I show that the issue of migration did not intrude into the racialized political debate about the transformation in the nature of British subjecthood (or nationality) but that, in the light of this racialization, there were secret discussions within the state about the possibility of preventing 'coloured' British subjects from migrating to Britain.

The Labour Government came to office with a reforming programme and facing a series of major economic problems, several of which were related to a

serious weakening of the national economy and of its competitive position in the capitalist world economy as a result of the war. It was committed to nationalization, the creation of a welfare state, full employment, and, more generally, 'fair shares' for all, a notion inculcated by the collective experience of deprivation and resistance during the war. But while the Government talked of socialism, and while it consolidated and to some extent strengthened many of the arenas of state intervention which had been established during the war, most of its actions were dedicated to the reconstruction of a capitalist economy. That reconstruction involved rebuilding the infrastructure of industrial production, increasing export production, and ensuring an adequate labour supply.⁴²

Early in its period of office, the Labour Government conservatively estimated the labour shortage to be in the order of one million persons,⁴³ although official estimates did vary over time.⁴⁴ The problem was considered to be especially acute in agriculture, coal mining, and textile production because of the contribution that these sectors could make to easing the balance of payments problem⁴⁵ or, in the case of coal, because of its centrality to sustaining industrial production generally.⁴⁶ In a situation of labour shortage, there are a number of options available to the state and capital, including mechanization as a form of labour substitution and the improvement of wages and conditions in sectors experiencing shortages. A further option is to increase the size of the active, paid labour force by drawing on a surplus population either within or from outside the nation state.⁴⁷

In practice, the Government sought to resolve the problem by both increasing the size of the working population and seeking to increase labour productivity, although the former strategy predominated for much of the period up to 1951. Thus, much effort was expended in persuading women and people of retirement age to enter or re-enter the labour market, these being the main elements of the internal relatively surplus population. But the Government also decided early in 1946 to draw upon an external surplus population, that is, to recruit foreign labour from Europe, a decision that was given great prominence in its *Economic Survey for 1947*.⁴⁹

The issue of migration was subsequently debated in Parliament in the light of the Government's somewhat hesitant initial efforts to recruit foreign labour. In February 1947, during a debate on displaced persons, there was bipartisan support for increased immigration. One of the main arguments was that immigration was necessary to resolve the labour shortage and as an accompaniment to a policy of full employment.⁵⁰ The same economic argument ran through the debate on the Polish Resettlement Bill in the same month. While the Government initially preferred that as many of the Poles would return to 'their own country',⁵¹ it also believed that it had a special responsibility to those in the Polish Armed Forces as a result of their contribution to the Allied war effort. This sense of obligation was strengthened by the continuing labour shortage.⁵² This latter view was largely endorsed by the Conservative opposition who criticized the Government for its tardiness in placing demobilized Poles in employment.⁵³

But Parliamentary debate about migration was not exclusively concerned with economics. In so far as attention was also paid to the biological implications of immigration, there was a racialization of all migration flows, including those from Europe. During the debate on displaced persons, one Conservative MP claimed that 'there are the strongest possible ethnographical reasons for having an infusion of vigorous new blood from overseas at the present time', noting that 'we have very greatly benefited . . . from other foreign blood at different times in the course of our history'.⁵⁴ There were similar references to 'stock' and 'race' by other speakers, all of whom claimed that there were biological advantages to be gained from immigration, especially if, as one MP put it, 'we act quickly, get the best of the pick, and a very good best it is'.⁵⁵

A similar discourse was evident in the debate on the Polish Resettlement Bill. In introducing the Bill, the Secretary of State for the Home Department claimed 'We have . . . had great experience in this country of the benefits that come from the assimilation of virile, active, and industrious people into our stock'. And he went on to suggest that there was good reason to believe that 'a great part of our strength comes from the fact that we, more than any other of the ancient nations of the earth, have been able to assimilate these people and get them into the mainstream of our civic life'.⁵⁶ This view was echoed by another MP who claimed that 'on the whole, it is a good thing for this race, which is a mongrel race, to be able to absorb into itself this great body of men'.⁵⁷ The idea of 'race' was also articulated in the debate on the British Nationality Bill.⁵⁹

In all this discourse, it was assumed or argued that the world's population consisted of a number of discrete biological 'races'. Another contributor to the debate on the British Nationality Bill grounded his conception of British nationality in this idea of 'race'. David Renton identified different sections of British communities outside the British Empire, including those in Egypt. He claimed that one group 'are British in the full sense. Mostly British born, they are racially British and are recognizable as such.' They could be distinguished from a second category who were legally British nationals but who:

. . . have little or no British blood in them. They do not often speak English or, for that matter, Scottish, Irish or Welsh. They cannot claim to have served the King and the British people; and they have no real right to our protection.⁵⁹

Thus, for this MP, Britishness was grounded firmly in biology rather than in the criteria established by the legal system to determine nationality and, as a result, 'race' became the foundation for 'nation', and so racism articulated with nationalism.⁶⁰

But not all who contributed to this debate about the implications and value of immigration in the early years of the Labour Government were positive about the consequences. Within Parliament, various objections were raised by a small number of MPs⁶¹ while the Royal Commission on Population drew very negative conclusions. Its report claimed that there were difficulties in identifying a source of immigrants which could supply the numbers required.

With the exceptions of Ireland, Italy, and the Netherlands, the Royal Commission believed that no European country contained a surplus population available for emigration. Furthermore, it identified 'assimilation' as a major problem and continued:

Immigration on a large scale into a fully established society like ours could only be welcomed without reserve if the immigrants were of good human stock and were not prevented by their religion or race from intermarrying with the host population and becoming merged in it.⁶²

On the basis of this criterion, the Royal Commission believed that 'the sources of supply of suitable immigrants for Great Britain are limited' and concluded that 'continuous large-scale immigration would possibly be impractical and would certainly be undesirable.'⁶³ A similar conclusion had been reached in a PEP report published in the previous year.⁶⁴ Significantly, the Royal Commission's review of the possible 'sources of supply' was limited to Europe and therefore (with the exception of Ireland) to people who were aliens. However, potentially as well as in reality (because a small migration did occur), British subjects in the colonies and the Commonwealth constituted another source of migrants. This source was ignored by the Royal Commission, presumably because they were not considered to be of 'good human stock'.

The silence of the Royal Commission on this matter was paralleled during the debate on the British Nationality Bill. While political debate on nationality legislation has, since the early 1960s become intimately intertwined with the question of immigration, this was not the case in the late 1940s. The migration of British subjects into Britain was not problematized by either the advocates or the opponents of the Bill, although there were references to the rights of British subjects in this respect. This suggests that there was no public conception of the possibility of a migration of British subjects from the colonies at this time. Yet the debate is of interest because of a conjunction of a racialized content with a reaffirmation of the right of entry into the 'Mother Country' of all British subjects.

Above, I have shown that the Bill introduced a distinction between citizenship of the United Kingdom and Colonies and of each independent Commonwealth country, although both categories were also designated as British subjects. During the debates, arguments were advanced against this change, including the claim that this disadvantaged citizens of Commonwealth countries because they did not achieve the status of citizen of the United Kingdom and Colonies as of right, but rather had to register for it. Additionally, it was argued that the diminution of the conception of British subjecthood removed a key conception that had held the British Empire together in the past.

For example, David Renton referred to the 'immense diversity of native peoples within the Colonies' and argued that 'it has not been an easy matter to keep together so many of the diverse and often primitive races of the world under the British flag.' He believed that this had only been possible by giving them:

... an easy conception ... of a great Queen in a distant land, who would give them protection, who would give them prosperity, who no doubt would expect them to work in return, but whose subjects they were. It was in that way that we got loyalty and obedience from them.⁶⁵

His conclusion was that the conception of 'citizen' could not effect this function of 'subject'. This view was echoed by Major Maxwell Fyfe speaking on behalf of the Conservative Opposition.⁶⁶

But even these advocates of a racialized (and racist), romanticized, and idealized notion of empire did not make any request to remove any of the rights (which included the right of entry into Britain) that accrued to subjecthood. Indeed, in this respect, their conservatism was consistent in retaining the legal statuses and relations of the past. Thus, Sir Maxwell Fyfe referred to 'our proud boast of the open door in this country to people from all the Colonies' and argued that:

... there ought to be an open door and a reception for every type. If we create a distinctive citizenship for Britain and Colonies, inevitably such differentiation will creep in. We must maintain our great metropolitan tradition of hospitality to everyone from every part of our Empire.⁶⁷

The Attorney-General, summing up the debate on the Second Reading for the Labour Government, denied that there was any such intention or implication. Referring to the legal status of Commonwealth citizens under the provisions of the British Nationality Bill, he claimed that 'As a British subject, who is at the same time a citizen of a Commonwealth country, he [*sic*] will be entitled to come here and enjoy precisely the same rights as he has previously enjoyed.'⁶⁸ Thus, whatever else divided the Government and Opposition in this debate, it had nothing to do with the right of British subjects to enter the United Kingdom.

However, despite the very public and apparently principled affirmation, this right was the subject of private discussion by state officials and the Labour Cabinet at various times during the period 1945-51. There was an exchange of views between civil servants and Ministers during 1947, during which it was recognized that aliens were being recruited to help resolve the labour shortage at a time when British subjects in the Caribbean were showing a desire to migrate to Britain to enter paid employment. Government Ministers expressed opposition to this latter development.⁶⁹

Then, early in 1948, the Colonial Office considered the possibility of using 'surplus colonial manpower' to resolve labour shortages. In the subsequent exchange of correspondence between civil servants, considerable reservations were again expressed.⁷⁰ In its final report in July 1949, the Colonial Office recommended that the Government should not establish any formal scheme to import British subjects from the Colonies to work in Britain.⁷¹ The issue was raised yet again following the arrival in June 1948 of 417 British subjects from Jamaica. The Colonial Secretary found himself under attack within the Government for allowing this to happen. He replied by pointing out that there were no legal powers to prevent the entry of British subjects but added that

'every possible step has been taken by the Colonial Office and by the Jamaican Government to discourage these influxes'.⁷²

These steps were insufficient to halt migration from the Caribbean and the issue was discussed once more within the Government. As a result, in June 1950 the Cabinet appointed a committee to undertake a review of 'the further means which might be adopted to check the immigration into this country of coloured people from the British Colonial Territories'.⁷³ The committee identified three methods of restricting the entry of 'coloured' British subjects but they all contradicted the long-established principle of the 'open-door' policy (which had been reaffirmed during the debate on the British Nationality Bill) and required that a distinction be drawn between 'coloured' citizens of the United Kingdom and Colonies and all others.

Concerning this distinction, the committee commended initially that 'Any solution depending on an apparent or concealed colour test would be so invidious as to make it impossible of adoption.' But they concluded that 'Nevertheless, the use of any powers taken to restrict the free entry of British subjects to this country would, as a general rule, be more or less confined to coloured persons.'⁷⁴ This recommendation to bifurcate the category of British subjects on the basis of their racialization, resulting in a distinction between 'coloured' and 'white' subjects and an inferiorization of the rights of the former was not, however, proceeded with in 1950 because the number of 'coloured' British subjects migrating to Britain remained small.⁷⁵ Legislation to achieve this objective was eventually passed by Parliament in 1962, following a decade of hesitation motivated by concern about the consequences of the accusation of racism.⁷⁶

CONCLUSION: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF NATIONALITY AND CITIZENSHIP

We can now confront the apparent paradox identified above. In the context of labour shortage, and of a policy to help resolve that shortage by the recruitment of migrant labour, the Labour Government facilitated the migration of aliens (many of whom were refugees) from Europe, but sought to prevent the entry of its own citizens from the colonies whose migration was motivated primarily by economic factors. The explanation of this paradox demonstrates that the outcome of the racialization of the potential sources of migrant labour subordinated the significance of nationality and citizenship, although this does not, by itself, explain why the Labour Government opted for alien rather than British labour. This explanation therefore takes issue with those accounts of the period which explain Government opposition in largely economic terms and which downplay or deny the impact of racism on the decision.⁷⁷

I have emphasized that the discourse of 'race' permeated all political debate about migration. It was not only British colonial subjects who were signified as biologically distinct, but also European aliens, something ignored

in Layton-Henry's account of the period.⁷⁸ The process of racialization was therefore universalized.⁷⁹ But it also established a hierarchy of superiority and inferiority. As a result, certain European migrants were signified positively as being of 'vigorous stock' which would strengthen what one MP defined as the British 'mongrel race'. Although the Labour Government retained reservations, it nevertheless (in association with other advocates of immigration) consented to the view that European migrants were biologically acceptable and could be expected to 'assimilate' to the British way of life.

As far as 'coloured' British subjects were concerned, Ministers and officials were more discreet about describing their racialized attributes. Certainly, no politician or state official argued publicly that the presence of colonial 'races' would result in the degeneration of the British 'race'. But there was a clear presumption that, because of their 'race', they would not be able to 'assimilate' to the 'British way of life', the explanation being considered to be a matter of common-sense understanding. But this obscured more that it revealed, unless it was believed that these people possessed some biological characteristic which prevented their 'assimilation'. In fact, this dimension of the racialization of migrant populations systematically obscured the determinate social process.

But a state official involved with the Working Party on the Employment in the United Kingdom of Surplus Colonial Labour claimed that it was the 'social implications' of introducing 'other races' which is 'the real answer to the question . . . and no amount of fencing will in the end lead the Working Party to any other conclusion'.⁸⁰ What mattered in practice was less the racialized characteristics of 'coloured' British subjects and more the beliefs of British citizens resident in Britain about such 'races'. The Labour Government and state officials were especially concerned about the potential implications of this racism for exclusionary practices,⁸¹ a concern that was expressed fleetingly in Parliamentary debates,⁸² but they were not prepared to challenge it when its object was 'coloured' British subjects, although they were prepared to do so in the case of European 'races' (who were therefore conceptualized as 'vigorous stock'). Consequently, their discourse and actions served to legitimate that racism.⁸³

But the legitimation of racism was not the only factor that led to the predominance of racialization over the legal reality of nationality and citizenship status. From the rights of citizenship, and therefore from the inferiorized position of aliens resident in or permitted to enter Britain, flowed other consequences concerning the commodification of labour power. Certainly under the terms of the work permit system and the contractual arrangements governing the entry of EVWs, the worker was subject to state control over to whom she or he sold her or his labour power. This restriction of the freedom of the worker to dispose of her or his labour power, and the consequent constitution of the worker as an unfree wage labourer,⁸⁴ has a special value in the context of labour shortage, as state officials recognized.⁸⁵

This is because it allowed the state to retain workers in sectors of employment where it was difficult to recruit and retain labour in a situation of

full employment. Further, at least in the case of the work permit system, the state was not required to finance the production and reproduction costs of the labourer, the worker being recruited by a contract which stipulated a temporary and limited period of residence. These restrictions could be legitimated by the fact that the workers were aliens rather than citizens. But they could not be applied to workers from the Caribbean because they were British subjects, a legal status that required that they enjoy all the rights of British citizens, including that of freedom to dispose of labour power within the market place.

This dichotomy between subject and alien was blurred by the specific circumstances of the Poles and the EVWs. This is because, to take the case of the EVWs, although deportation was formally possible, the practicality of deportation was constrained by the fact that they had been recruited from displaced persons camps, were stateless, and therefore lacked a 'home' to which they could be 'repatriated'. In effect, their refugee status ensured that, despite the contractual character of the terms of their migration to Britain, they were destined to settle. This was even more clear in the case of the Poles, whose insertion into British social relations was seen by the Government to involve settlement because of their unwillingness to return to Poland under a communist Government. Thus, in both cases, these migrants were not British subjects, while their presence was legitimated as source of labour power, yet the outcome was, for the vast majority, permanent settlement, with the result that there could not be any long-term positive economic consequences arising from temporary residence or from some permanent status as contractual, directed wage labour.

Thus, in post-1945 Britain, the status of refugee in the context of labour shortage also blurred the common distinction between 'free' migrants who are mobile across national borders in search of a buyer for their labour power (migrant labour), and 'forced' migrants whose mobility is determined by political persecution (refugee migrants).⁸⁶ In addition to the more general difficulty of determining the character of the freedom of the labourer whose migration is forced by virtue of the necessity to obtain a wage income, it is clear from the evidence that the admission of refugees to Britain in this period was not determined by solely humanitarian considerations, but was also shaped by the perceived economic value of their presence.

A further dimension of the paradox is revealed by Duffield's claim that it is mistaken to equate 'the importation of foreign workers with the incorporation of blacks as different ways of satisfying the same labour shortage'.⁸⁷ He argues that the period under examination here was characterized by a shortage of skilled labour for a work process that was largely unchanged, whereas during the 1950s, mechanization reduced the skill content of the labour that was required. Thus, he claims that, during the former period of absolute labour shortage, the recruitment of foreign labour was characterized by attempts to fit the skills of the labourer with the demand for skilled labour in the undermanned industries, while during the period of relative labour shortage, it was semi- and unskilled labour that was sought. He implies that 'black' labour

recruited during the 1950s did not possess the relevant skills required in the late 1940s and he argues that such labour was unacceptable to the Government because of the opposition of 'indigenous' labour and because, as British subjects, they were not subject to state control and could not be prevented from settling permanently in Britain.⁸⁹

The argument about control is undoubtedly correct (although Duffield ignores the fact that the majority of foreign migrants did eventually settle), but other aspects of his assessment are problematic. First, many of the unfilled vacancies for which foreign migrant labour was destined were in fact for semi- and unskilled jobs, especially in agriculture and domestic service. Furthermore, most Irish migrants were seeking semi- and unskilled work, yet Duffield ignores the continuing significance of this long-established migration flow. Second, while an attempt was made to link the experience and skills of foreign labour with the skill content of vacant jobs, a large proportion (perhaps even a majority) of foreign migrants had either to be trained to undertake the work in which they were placed or were placed in jobs which did not correspond to their qualifications and experience.⁸⁹

Third, Duffield legitimates the oft-cited and mistaken claim that Caribbean migrants were experienced predominantly in semi- and unskilled work. Fourth, as I have emphasized, foreign migrants from Europe as well as British colonial migrants were racialized and became the object of hostility. Indeed, the possibility of such resistance was a key factor in the Labour Government's hesitancy in initiating the recruitment of foreign migrant labour while the reality of such resistance was a factor determining the demise of the migrant labour solution to labour shortage.⁹⁰

Hence, while there is considerable relevance in Duffield's distinction between absolute and relative labour shortage, he applies it in an unconditional manner. Moreover, his dichotomy between 'black' and 'foreign' migrant labour is misleading in so far as it misrepresents the character of the signification of migration by implying that only migrants from the colonies were racialized. It is more accurate to conceive of the dichotomy of migration flows first in terms of categories of nationality and citizenship, from which flow differential rights of entry and settlement and which have differential implications for the imposition of restrictions on the commodification of labour power. It is this complex of judicial differentiation, with all its implications for processes of migration and settlement, which was then racialized as a totality in the period 1945-51.

While I have not attempted to address the broader question of why the Labour Government of 1945-51 chose not to extend and enlarge the recruitment of aliens as part of its strategy to resolve the problem of labour shortage in the post-war capitalist economy, I have offered an explanation for the fact that it expressed a clear preference for the recruitment of alien migrants over British subjects from the colonies to fill vacant positions. This was structured by a racialization of the various sources of potential migrants, and so by the consequent assumption that the presence of 'coloured' British subjects would more likely lead to social disorder because of the hostility of

British subjects within Britain, but it was grounded in the fact that British citizens from the colonies could not be deprived of the freedom to commodify their labour power in the way that aliens could.

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